OregonLive.com
Everything Oregon

In the Texas sky, a reminder of the price

02/03/03

David Sarasohn[

A long time ago, at a different moment in what sometimes seems a different country, I stood in the high desert of Southern California and watched the first space shuttle being rolled out.

It was the kind of moment heavy with flown-in VIPs and public relations officers, and as the vehicle came into view, a military band rolled into the immediately recognizable first two notes of the theme from "Star Trek."

The silvery prototype coming down the strip was called, of course, the Enterprise.

We have clung tightly to the idea that space exploration would be like "Star Trek," quickly becoming ordinary and routine, graduates of Starfleet Academy steadily pushing out to the far edges of the galaxy. At the beginning, the shuttle was launched from a flying Boeing 747, which seemed the perfect image: a symbol of previously unimaginable wealth and technology just spinning off exploration of the rest of the universe.

The vision barely allowed for something like Saturday morning's scars across the Texas sky, as the single swath of the shuttle broke into pieces, into separate trails of white across the blue. That long dissolving image, like the single explosive destruction of Challenger, is now permanently carved into our national album.

Saturday and Sunday, the immediate official responses -- as always -- were that Americans would be determined but not discouraged, that we would still find our ways into space. "We're going to get together and fix this problem. We're going to launch shuttles again," NASA shuttle project manager Ron Dittmore said at an early press conference.

"This doesn't deter my support for the space program," Rep. Mike Honda, D-Calif., of the House Science Committee, told the San Francisco Chronicle.

"The space program has so much to do with progress and human curiosity and what goes on out there. That will remain strong."

It will, and it should. But everything we find will be purchased at a cost.

With our communications power at least as powerful as our rocket power, we have nearly domesticated space travel, have almost turned it into a made-for-TV special. When men first landed on the moon, a commentator pointed out that prophets had imagined thousands of versions of the event, but the one thing nobody had imagined was that all of Earth would watch it live on television. Returning astronauts are turned into celebrities, with book deals and elections to the Senate, and after a while the astounding, chillingly dangerous thing they've done fades into the earthbound achievements of other vaguely familiar names.

Until we are painfully reminded of what's actually involved.

The Columbia contained the first astronaut from Israel, a country where tragedy never gets too far beneath the surface. As Bradley Burston wrote in the newspaper Ha'aretz, Israelis brought "a language, an entire culture, a sweepingly tragic historical tradition, in which the word for space, hallal, can also mean a slain individual, and an immense, crushing emptiness."

But, he noted, the awareness didn't ease the pain; it seemed to make it worse.

Americans have been peering too often through billows and trails of smoke these days, smoke rising up from the ground, booming down from the air and sometimes scrawled across the sky. The images will not drive us off, but they should remind us of the costs, and the risks, of the places we go and the decisions we make.

When we look through the smoke, we will always see ourselves.

Space travel may be about stunning visions of the Earth from the heavens, and about courageous figures making impossible calculations while floating in zero gravity, and maybe someday it really will be about transporter beams and phasers always set on stun. But it will also always be about scars of white across a blue sky.

Someday, it may be ordinary.

It will never be routine.

David Sarasohn, Associate Editor of The Oregonian, can be reached at davidsarasohn@news.oregonian.com.